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**Territorialities of Power in the Ecuadorian Coast**  
The Politics of an Environmentally  
Dispossessed Group

Sara Latorre



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Research Network on Interdependent  
Inequalities in Latin America



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# **Territorialities of Power in the Ecuadorian Coast**

## **The Politics of an Environmentally Dispossessed Group**

Sara Latorre

### **Abstract**

In recent years the Latin American region has become a stage for the emergence of new indigeneities, that is, the organization of new political subjects based on new typologies of indigenous identities that challenge the narrow constructions of indigeneity that require fixed geographic or cultural-racial characteristics. This paper aims to contribute to this growing research and literature as it presents a case study in which an environmentally dispossessed group has implemented a novel ethnic strategy based on the concepts of “ancestrality” and “peoplehood” in order to demand collective mangrove land titles, and thus, gain more control over their natural resources. In particular, it addresses the reasons explaining why the mangrove gatherers’ grassroots movement in Ecuador has declared itself to be the Pueblos Ancestrales del Ecosistema Manglar (Ancient People of the Mangrove Ecosystem). This paper argues that this ecosystem-based ethnic identity responds to a total lack of recognition and valuing of a cultural way of life with nature (mangroves). This case study highlights how current natural resource depletion is pushing novel deployments of indigeneity by the fact that this legal category entails rights to collective land and at the same time highlights the dangers of exclusion resulting from granting collective land titles exclusively in terms of indigeneity.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Politics | Indigeneity | Natural resource conflicts

### **Biographical Notes**

Sara Latorre is a doctoral student at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (ICTA/UAB). She holds a Master’s Degree in Latin American Studies with a concentration in Environmental Studies from the Latin American University of Social Sciences (FLACSO), Ecuador. She has long research experience in Ecuador on the topics of socio-ecological conflicts, interculturality in relation to conservation projects and social movements. Her doctoral research focuses on the novel ethnic-based political strategy enacted by the grassroots social movement linked to the mangrove ecosystem in Ecuador as a strategy for resisting environmental dispossession. She received a short-term scholarship (November 2010 – April 2011) from the [desiguALdades.net](http://desiguALdades.net) Research Network in Research Dimension III (Socio-environmental Inequalities).



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## 1. Introduction

The 1990s became, for most Latin American countries, the climax for two interrelated phenomena: the ethnic politics dominance and the explosion of natural resource conflicts. In this region, on the one hand, indigenous movements (and to a lesser extent afro-descendant movements) have become the hegemonic social movements among the leftist wing (Becker 2008). They have successfully mobilized discourses of cultural difference from the dominant “white-mestizo” society in strategic ways in order to demand special rights. Thus, several constitutional bodies across Latin-American countries have enshrined their pluri-ethnic, pluri-cultural character and granted them collective rights based on their condition as “ethnic groups”.<sup>1</sup> This means that the social category of “indigenous people” (and in some cases also “afro-descendants”) has become a legal category with collective rights such as the right to own land as collective property (Ng’weno 2007, Stocks 2005, Wade [1997] 2010). This fact, in turn, may allow those recognized as such to confront hegemonic actors such as transnational capital and the state in better conditions than their homologous “mestizo” (see Bauer 2010, Hooker 2005, Ng’weno 2007, Warren and Jackson 2002). On the other hand, the increase of land and resource conflicts in this continent comes about mainly as a result of its position as a periphery in the global economy (Wade [1997] 2010). The very dynamic of capital is that it needs to continue to incorporate new resources for economic growth and accumulation. In this regard, nowadays, throughout Latin America, new areas have been converted into new commodity frontiers and/or the physical conditions of old areas are being dismantled. This spatial expansion has not happened in empty spaces; on the contrary, they are the locales of others, which play fundamental symbolic and material roles for their inhabitants (Escobar 2008, Perrault 2001, Wade [1997] 2010).

Accordingly, within this context – capital spatial expansion into more isolated areas and the legal category of indigenous people – in recent years, this region has become the stage for the emergence of new indigeneities, by which I mean the organization of new political subjects based on new typologies of indigenous identities that challenge a narrow construction of indigeneity that requires fixed geographic or cultural-racial characteristics. In this regard, the literature provides many fascinating examples that describe how social groups in diverse cultural, racial, and geographic categories have (recently) declared themselves to be a single kind of “indigenous people” in order to secure collective land and resource rights (see Anderson 2007, Bauer 2010, Brondo and Woods 2007, Hoffman French 2004, Jackson and Warren 2005, Wade [1997] 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Constitutional reforms recognizing multicultural nations took place in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, and Ecuador.

This paper aims to contribute to this growing research area and literature as it presents a case study in which an environmentally dispossessed group in Ecuador has implemented a novel ethnic strategy based on the concepts of “ancestrality” and “peoplehood” in order to demand collective mangrove land titles, and thus, gain more control over their natural resources. This political subject has declared itself as “Ancient Peoples” who belong to a specific natural ecosystem while constituting a “multi-racialized” group. This paper argues that this ecosystem-based ethnic politics responds to a complete lack of recognition and valuing of a cultural way of life with nature (mangroves), and highlights the dangers of exclusion resulting from granting land titles exclusively in terms of indigeneity.

The paper addresses the reasons explaining why the mangrove gatherers’ grassroots movement in Ecuador has declared itself as *Pueblos Ancestrales del Ecosistema Manglar* or PAEM (Ancient People of the Mangrove Ecosystem). Thus, it focuses on both on socio-ecological and socio-political dimensions of social inequalities.

The theoretical framework of the paper draws upon the broad institutional literature that emphasizes the role of institutions and property rights regimes as key components to understanding natural resource territorial dynamics and distributional issues (Acheson 2006, Adger and Luttrell 2000, Berkes 1989, Bromley 1992, Ostrom 1990). Empirical evidence presented begins with analysis of supporting data from secondary sources, but is complemented by the results of 39 interviews and field observations carried out during 5 months of fieldwork along the Ecuadorian coast in 2010. The work included both semi-structured and extended interviews with national and local leaders, community members, academics, representatives of NGOs and ministerial employees.

The paper is divided into four sections. Firstly, the recent theoretical approaches on identity construction and indigeneity are presented. Secondly, the local setting, the Ecuadorian coast and its related mangroves as well as its social and cultural inhabitants, are introduced. Thirdly, the development process of the shrimp-farming industry in Ecuador, its main characteristics and its spatial dynamics from its inception to the present are discussed. Fourthly, the upsurge of the PAEM and its demands is presented. Finally some general conclusions are drawn.

## **2. Indigeneity: Contemporary Theoretical Approaches to Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Politics**

The decades of 1970s-80s played a key role in moving beyond the previous primordialist approaches to ethnic identities, to embrace what have become commonly known as constructivist theoretical perspectives. While the former considered in general terms

ethnic identities as natural manifestations prior to experience or interaction, the latter assumed their social construction nature (Tilley 1997, Vermeulen and Govers 1997, Wade [1997] 2010). Influential innovations that contributed to this theoretical shift were: Frederik Barth's work (1969) on ethnicity which emphasized the importance of social interactions in shaping ethnic identities; Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger's article (1983) on the invention of tradition; and Benedict Anderson's "imagined political communities" concept (1991). In addition, a more dynamic and inclusive notion of culture was being adopted within anthropology as a response to diverse contemporary global phenomenon such as migration and urbanization processes or the emergence of ethnic social movements. These new social experiences and contexts were particularly salient to challenge traditional schemas which ascribed concepts such as rural, fixed, atemporal, or mono-racial to the category of "indigenous group" (Hamilton and Placas 2011). Consequently, from the 1990s onwards, scholars agreed on conceptualizing ethno-racial identities as shifting, de-centered, contextual, relational constructions, subject to political mobilization and entangled with other subject positions such as class, gender, sexuality (Murray Li 2000, Clifford 2001, Hall [1986] 1996, Wade [1997] 2010). This development emphasized the fluidity of ethno-racial meanings, as well as their contested character (socio-political categories). In this regard, anthropologists have called for the abandonment of useless debates on the definition of "indigenous people" as well as of reductionist dualisms such as authentic/false, race/ethnicity or indigenous/non-indigenous (Anderson 2007, Jackson and Warren 2005, Wade [1997] 2010). Rather, they have stressed the need to focus on both the political context in which people choose to identify with a certain identity label and the meaning they ascribe to it (Hathaway 2010, Murray Li 2000, Jackson and Warren 2005, Wade 1995). The former implies inquiring about the reasons and the processes by which identification occurs, as well as seeing who it empowers and who it excludes. The latter encompasses asking about the many ways of being "indigenous" over time and place. On the other hand, today the fact that the arena for the constitution of identities has been for centuries a global one has been acknowledged (Perrault 2001, Jackson and Warren 2005, Wade [1997] 2010), and new concepts have been developed in order to gain a better grasp of such complex realities as "articulation", "positioning", "becoming", or the recent one "indigenous space" (Clifford 2001, Hathaway 2010, Hoffman French 2004, Murray Li 2000, Warren and Jackson 2002). All of these express the fact that ethnic identities and ethnic politics are a product of collective political aspirations shaped by socio-historical processes. In the case presented here, it is mainly the context of natural resource depletion and unequal patterns of ecological distribution which is very likely to have pushed this novel deployment of indigeneity.

### 3. The Ecuadorian Intertidal Coast: its Mangroves and Inhabitants

Ecuador's coastal region is constituted by a rich alluvial plain that principally comprises, from north to south, the following provinces: Esmeraldas, Manabí, Santa Elena, Guayas and El Oro. Historically this region has relied on primary-exported activities, mainly single crops such as cocoa, bananas and coffee. However, the coastal strip remained relatively untouched until the development of shrimp-farming at the end of the 1960s as will be observed. In this intertidal zone, mangroves were the dominant vegetation.<sup>2</sup> Mangroves are widely recognized as one of the most productive coastal habitats in the tropics as well as being key providers of many socio-economic and environmental services. According to sources from the Center for Remote Sensing (CLIRSEN), before the development of shrimp-farming, the Ecuadorian shoreline once had approximately 202,201 ha of mangroves.<sup>3</sup>

This ecosystem has long been occupied by a stable human population dating back to the pre-Columbian period (Marcos 2005). The main traditional uses undertaken by these pre-Columbian cultures which are still practiced today are: the cutting of trees for firewood, charcoal, small diameter poles for light construction, and for domestic and medicinal use; artisanal fishing; shellfish and crab collecting (Snedaker et al. 1988; Boderó and Robadue 1995).

Mangrove inhabitants are a heterogeneous group in terms of racial perceptions. In the Esmeraldas province, the population linked to mangroves is mainly Afro-Ecuadorian whereas in the central-Southern provinces, mangrove people are composed of *mestizos* (mixed-race population) and the indigenous population. However, these identity categories are not relevant in their everyday life. On the contrary, productive identities such as crab or shellfish gatherers, combined with similar conditions of social vulnerability and poverty, play a more important role in self-identification processes. In general, mangrove inhabitants present low wages, informal labor and the exploitation of intermediaries (ECOBIOTEC 2009a), malnutrition, low levels of education, and deficient public infrastructure and services (C-CONDEM 2007a, Ocampo-Thomason 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> The intertidal zone is defined as the zone between the lowest and highest tide mark. The term "mangrove" refers to both trees and shrubs that have developed morphological adaptations to the tidal environment and to the ecosystem itself.

<sup>3</sup> There is no unanimity regarding the total amount of mangrove ecosystems before the shrimp-farming development. Official data (Ministerial Agreement 238, Official Register 722 of 6 July, 1987) stated that 362,802 ha of land with mangrove cover existed, as well as other forest species and salt flats. The most reliable data comes from CLIRSEN, which based on remote sensing data, provided a register of mangroves, salt flats, and shrimp ponds at different periods of time (1969, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1995, 1999, and 2006).

In spite of the ancient occupation and common management practices by the mangrove inhabitants, this ecosystem, as well as the whole intertidal zone, is considered a “National Good of Public Use”. This means that the mangrove land property belongs to the state and gives to the intertidal zone an inalienable, unattachable and imprescriptible character. However, this zone can be permanently used under conditions established by the Code of Maritime Police.<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. Background of the Shrimp-Farming Industry in Ecuador**

Shrimp-farming is the most profitable fishing industry in the world and has been concentrated in tropical indebted developing countries, mainly in Asia and Latin America. This industry has been largely promoted by aid agencies, international financial institutions and governments since the 1970s as an alternative to over-exploited wild fisheries and as a means of increasing economic growth, reducing poverty, and improving food safety (EJF 2003; FAO 2006; Rivera-Ferre 2009).

In Latin America, the development of the shrimp-farming industry has been characterized since its inception by an entrepreneurial rationale and large-scale farming methods (Bailey 1989; Wurmann et al. 2004). Thus, up to now it has been controlled by the wealthiest sectors of Ecuadorian society, whose interest in aquaculture is limited to making substantial economic profits in an export business rather than achieving food safety and increasing nutritional levels (FAO 2006). This class-based division between shrimp-farming owners (wealthy classes) and mangrove inhabitants (subaltern classes) is also expressed in terms of geographic space. While shrimp-farming owners are mostly Ecuadorians who do not live near the mangrove areas and do not depend directly from their resources for making a living, mangrove people tend to live close to mangrove areas as well as base their livelihoods on mangrove natural resources. These differences will be politicized and framed in terms of “Ancestral Peoples” versus “new comers” by this political subject.

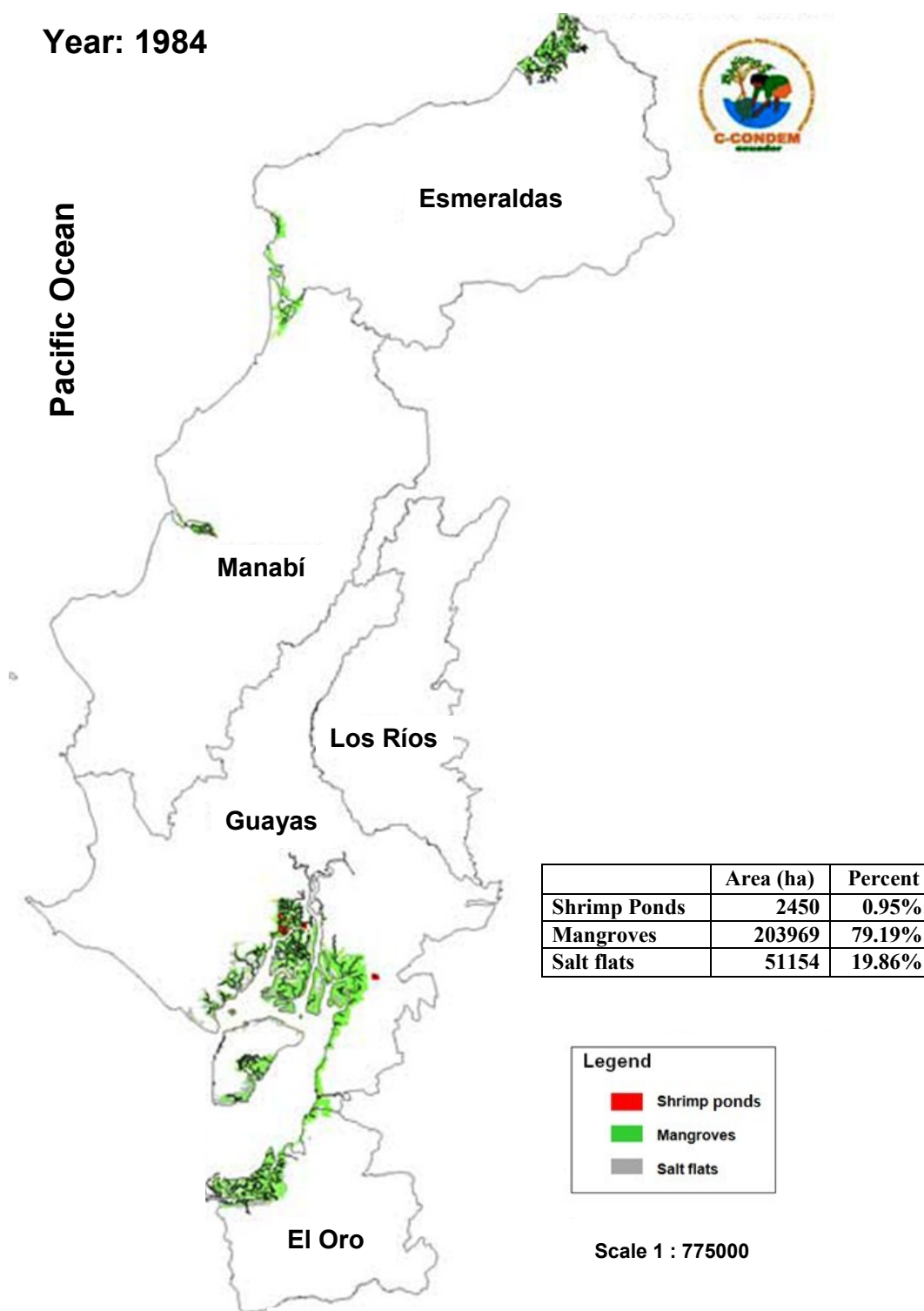
Following these economic-export objectives, Ecuador has become the leading regional shrimp-producer. The origin of Ecuadorian shrimp aquaculture was linked to the limited industrialization process in the mid-60s (Larrea 2006). It was fostered through land concessions, tax breaks, easy loans and technical assistance (Snedaker et al. 1988). As a consequence, in the 1990s its weight in the Ecuadorian economy became very important. The average earnings from farmed shrimp exports was around 3.5% of GDP, and it reached 4.5% of the GDP in the years 1997, 1998, 1999 (Marriot 2003). Hereafter, its contribution reduced drastically due to a severe disease outbreak. However, since 2003, farmed shrimp exports have been continually increasing until present (Wurmann

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<sup>4</sup> Code of Maritime Police, Official Register 1201-S20 of 9 August, 1960 ongoing.

et al. 2004; CNA 2010). Nowadays, around 90% of the shrimp production is based on farming practices (Marriot 2003).

**Map 1: Ecuadorian Mangrove Areas**



Source: C-CONDEM 2007, used with permission



The first shrimp ponds were constructed on the south coast, in the provinces of El Oro (1966) and Guayas (1976). However, the industry quickly spread toward the north provinces of Manabí (1978) and Esmeraldas (1985), where hundreds of shrimp ponds were built. In spite of the preference for salt flat areas in which to locate the shrimp farms, as they became too scarce, ponds started to be built both in intertidal mangrove forest areas and on supra-tidal land (Twilley 1989; Southgate 1991).

The particularities of the Ecuadorian shrimp-farming industry, mainly its export-oriented character, its domination by wealthy domestic actors, and its mono-use land pattern, will have tremendous implications for the production of this new political subject and collective identity formation as will be described.

## **5. Socio-environmental Transformations and Mangroves**

The following section describes the main socio-environmental transformations linked to mangroves over time and space, focusing on the interrelated dynamic between the shrimp-farming industry and the mangrove governance regime. It is divided into five phases taking into consideration issues about mangrove property rights, hegemonic mangrove representations, and management policies and regulations.

### **5.1 Phase I: Mangroves as Wastelands and Mangrove Gatherers as “Backwards” People**

Up to the late 1970s mangrove ecosystems were considered wastelands, which did not contribute to increasing national economic profits. The main reason why they were not removed earlier in spite of their undervaluation was the unsuitability of their soil for cultivating (Snedaker et al. 1988; Bailey 1989). Therefore, when the shrimp-farming industry emerged, it was welcomed without any kind of concerns. Its inception was characterized by a lack of any meaningful planning, control or consideration of long-term impacts (Olsen and Coello 1995). Particularly, its consequences over the way of living of those populations linked to mangrove ecosystems.

The system for granting concessions in the intertidal zone was complex and involved many different agency departments. It consisted of a ten year lease, with fees of less than \$10/ha/year charged (Southgate 1991; Olsen and Coello 1995). Thus, it provided no incentives for adopting intensive farming methods and discouraging environmental degradation. Shrimp growers found that it was more profitable to increase production by continually extending their pond surface, rather than investing in improving the productivity of existing ponds.

Between 1979 and 1986 the industry expanded very rapidly. The huge return benefits, along with the high price of shrimp in the international market and the abundance of shrimp in the developmental phases known as “post-larvae” (PL) – the wild input necessary for the ponds – explain this rapid growth. The abundance of applications for shrimp farm permits exceeded the administrative capacity (Perez and Robadue 1989). According to CLIRSEN, from there being no shrimp ponds in 1969, by 1984 89,368 ha had been built (CLIRSEN 1990). This over-saturation combined with the shrimp owners’ lucrative vision meant that a lot of ponds were built without one or more of the required permits (Pérez and Robadue 1989). Bribes and corruption were common practices (Southgate 1991; Olsen and Coello 1995). During 1985, the government established several deadlines in order to regularize the amount of unauthorized shrimp ponds. However, this enforcement measure was continually postponed until April 1987 and then indefinitely following a year of crisis caused by the drop in oil revenues (Pérez and Robadue 1989). This lack of government support to powerless mangrove inhabitants triggered their organizational conformation and collective actions in the following years.

The total amount of shrimp farms in 1984, 70% of them were constructed on mangrove tree cover, 15% on salt flats, and 15% on agricultural land (upland) (LiPuma and Meltzoff 1985, cited in Sutinen et al. 1989). In 1979 this enormous mangrove deforestation led to the government implementing the 2939 Supreme Decree,<sup>5</sup> which prohibited the conversion of mangroves to shrimp ponds. Consequently, part of the expansion of the shrimp-farming industry carried out in converted mangrove soil was illegal. According to Robadue (1995), 9% of the shrimp pond area in 1984 was illegal. Unfortunately, there are no specific data about the number of shrimp ponds constructed in previous mangrove forests since this ban. However, the loss of mangroves per year (ha) for the period from 1969 to 1984 was 1,439 ha (Olsen et al. 1995).

Apart from the exclusive acquisition of the shrimp pond area, shrimp farmers claimed buffer zones around them into which local people could not trespass. To ensure this, the presence of armed guards who shot at and set dogs on traditional users if they infringed upon shrimp property boundaries was common (personal interview, August 6, 2010). Over the years, a number of deaths and disappearances have occurred in suspicious circumstances that are presumed to be linked to the shrimp industry (EJF 2003). This massive mangrove loss in a very short period of time combined with the privatization of the mangrove people’s productive and reproductive spaces had contributed to strength a sense of belonging among mangrove gatherers in opposition to the others (shrimp owners).

During this period, due to the predominance of extensive farming methods, this industry

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<sup>5</sup> Supreme Decree 2939, Official Register 596 of 23 October, 1978.



directly relied on the abundance of wild post-larvae (PL) and clean seawater for shrimp production. PL collection was undertaken by fishermen and mangrove gatherers who sold it to middlemen, who in turn, passed it on to the shrimp owners. This activity was so well-paid that PL fishers saw their income increase by two to tenfold (Olsen and Maugle 1986, cited in Sutinen et al. 1989). The amount of people working in this activity during this phase differs according to different sources; however, the most reliable estimation was 90,000 fishermen by 1983 (Twilley 1989; Sutinen et al. 1989). Furthermore, there was an affluence of new PL fishermen moving in from other Ecuadorian regions (Olsen and Coello 1995). The harmful collection techniques that they employed, combined with large mangrove destruction, caused the first PL shortages. This situation arrived at a critical moment during 1984 because of the natural PL shortages produced by the post-Niño event (Snedaker et al. 1988). As a result, the shrimp-farming sector, concerned about the long-term stability of the industry, solicited support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to finance research. It was carried out in mid-1984 by a group of scientists from Miami University who examined the relationship between the shrimp aquaculture industry and the loss of the mangrove ecosystem. The report was very critical of the anarchic shrimp-farming expansion and its effects on wetland ecosystems. It urged the government to zone all mangrove areas to protect access for traditional uses (Snedaker et al. 1988). These quick transformations and negative impacts contributed to the emergence of the first voices recognizing the need for more effective natural resource management practices.

As a result, during this phase the Ecuadorian state claimed legal authority over mangrove areas to grant long-term leases to those who had the financial means to develop significant aquaculture and other enterprises. In doing so, it did not recognize the traditional rights and historic use practices carried out by mangrove people for centuries. Instead, it solidified new property claims by newly-resident shrimp farmers and absentee owners and agribusiness. Furthermore, the state put its authority behind the industrial transformation of the coastal strip into a mosaic of interlocking and contiguous ponds. From a multiple-use area where different users co-exist, it has become a mono-use land dominated mainly by one powerful and single actor.

## **5.2 Phase II: Mangroves as Biodiversity-rich Ecosystems and Mangrove Gatherers as a Threat**

The rapid growth of shrimp-farming on the coastal strip from 1977 to 1984 presented a major challenge for Ecuadorian regulatory agencies. The concerns were confirmed when in 1985 CLIRSEN published a document that revealed extensive damage caused by the shrimp aquaculture and urbanization processes (CLIRSEN 1990). In response to this mangrove destruction, specific and stricter lease and operating

permit requirements for shrimp-farming were adopted from 1985 onwards (Perez and Robadue 1989). Besides, the government implemented Executive Decree 824,<sup>6</sup> which declared mangrove conservation, protection and restoration a matter of public interest. This decree also prohibited the traditional practices of local users. During the next two years, the government passed the Ministerial Decree 498<sup>7</sup> and 238,<sup>8</sup> respectively, which gave the category of “Reserved Forest” to 362,802 ha of wetland areas.

This change in attitude (at least formal and rhetorical) can be attributed in part to the rising influence of environmental concerns at an international level as well as to greater knowledge of the multiple functions and values of wetlands (Matthews 1993). Worldwide, many scientific publications demonstrated mangroves’ physical and regulatory role as a coastline stabilizer as well as their biological productivity. At the international governance level, in 1971 the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, which is considered a major milestone in the elaboration of new policies for mangrove management, was held and exhorted the protection of this ecosystem.

As a reflection of this international concern, during these years (1985-1989), Ecuador adopted a mangrove ecosystem conservation policy based on a centralized government approach. It consisted mainly of the implementation of several laws and regulations prohibiting either the destruction or alteration of mangroves and the installation of shrimp farm ponds. Furthermore, with few exceptions, the government did not allocate any financial or administrative resources to allow the mangrove conservation laws to take effect (Bodero and Robadue 1995). Consequently, since the economic and political circumstances favored the expansion of the shrimp-farming industry, the pace of mangrove loss increased. According to Bodero and Robadue (1995) during the period of 1984-1987, the rate of mangrove loss per year was 2,434 ha, and during the period 1987-1991 it was 3,348 ha.

These unsustainable paths of ecosystem change, and even the sustainability of the shrimp-farming industry, contributed to a Joint Project Agreement, known as the Coastal Resource Management Program (CRMP), being signed in 1986 by the Ecuadorian and U.S. governments. It was designed to outline “how to institutionalize progress toward more sustainable forms of development along Ecuador’s coast” (Olsen 2000: 1). Along with Sri Lanka and Thailand, the Ecuadorian CRMP was one of three cases of a pilot program about integrated coastal resource management sponsored by the USAID (Epler and Olsen 1993). It was implemented by the University of Rhode Island (U.S.) with the Ecuadorian partnership. Initially conceived as a 3-year effort, it was

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<sup>6</sup> Executive Decree 824, Official Register 64 of 24 June, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Ministerial Decree 498, Official Register 591 of 24 December, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Ministerial Decree 238 Official Register 722 of 6 July, 1987.

extended to 2008. With mixed results, as discussed below, it provided a framework for understanding the ecosystem as a whole – which contributed to the emergence of a local ecosystem-based identity.

During the period from 1986 to 1989, the CRMP was dedicated to exploring viable alternatives to the failed policy of prohibiting mangrove cutting. The staff, acknowledging the fact that the shrimp aquaculture was the most powerful agent of ecosystem change in Ecuador's estuaries, during the year 1986, dedicated its efforts to making a review about the ecological, economic, and technical issues affecting this industry. The idea was to promote a policy dialogue at the national level with the presence of both government agencies and the shrimp-farming sector (Olsen and Coello 1995). With this objective in mind, that same year, the CRMP sponsored a national symposium where it presented a draft strategy for a sustainable shrimp-farming industry. The result was, as Stephen Olsen and Segundo Coello (1995) stated, that there was little interest on the part of the government and the industry in following up on the strategy as a whole. On the one hand, the shrimp-farming sector was very skeptical regarding collaboration with the government, and its interest was reduced to obtaining technical assistance on specific problems such as water quality and PL supply. Furthermore, when the strategy was announced, the PL stocks were again abundant, and the perception of crisis and the need for resource management disappeared. On the other hand, government action was limited to passing some economic measures to reduce illegal shrimp exportations and classifying all the mangroves as "reserved forest" as stated above.<sup>9</sup>

From 1987 to 1989 the CRMP focused on a consultative process to identify the key issues related to the institutional framework for compliance with coastal management laws. In 1988 it drafted a Strategy for National Coastal Resource Management which was accompanied by a manifesto for support from leaders in all coastal provinces (Robadue 1995). These actions reflect the increase of constituencies and public support at the local level. At this stage, mangrove gatherers as well as traditional fishers were feeling the impact of lost productivity and/or access to natural resources. Thus, they were anxious to begin implementing mangrove stewardship actions and participating in resource management (Bodero and Robadue 1995). In this way the CRMP had a direct effect on fostering indigeneity through activation of the local population as a whole.

In 1988 the CRMP, motivated by this community-level support, made another attempt to engage the shrimp aquaculture industry at a national level. Its objective was this

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<sup>9</sup> In 1983 the Ecuadorian government imposed that shrimp farmers had to export shrimps at a dollar exchange rate that was 30% below the free market rate. It resulted in massive tax evasion by smuggling yields to Peru for export.

time to advance toward the diversification of the industry (Olsen and Coello 1995). To achieve this, the CRMP brought two eminent people, H.T. Odum and Chua Thia-Eng, to Ecuador to view the situation and provide specific recommendations for establishing an action plan.<sup>10</sup> Both concluded that a set of national policies was essential. They advocated for a sustainable mangrove multi-use policy rather than the preexisting one of no-use one; and emphasized the need for reducing the total area of ponds and prohibiting further pond construction (Chua and Kungvankij 1990). With these new inputs, in 1990, the CRMP sponsored another national symposium. This time, the initial response from both the shrimp-farming industry and the government was positive. All the actors agreed on the need for a coherent national strategy developed through a collaborative process involving both the private and public sectors. However, during the meeting the shrimp-farming interests only focused on ways of maximizing the value of its exports (Olsen and Coello 1995). Once again, the broader objectives of the coastal management program found little support within the industry.

In short, Ecuador's mangrove governance policies have focused on the centralized enforcement of a virtual prohibition of mangrove uses. Furthermore, while these policies have benefited the consolidation of powerful industry that has overexploited and misused fishery resources, coastal estuaries and mangroves, at the same time, they have accused traditional users of having the same harmful impact as the shrimp-farming industry. In view of this situation, the CRMP has been making an effort to adopt alternative approaches to management that take into account the wide variability in the physical characteristics of the mangrove ecosystem as well as the coastal communities and resource users' claims and needs. However, this effort has had poor results.

### **5.3 Phase III: Pilot Resource Management Areas Based on a Participative Approach**

Finally, in 1989 the Ecuadorian government officially adopted the Rhode Island's initiative in coastal resource management by issuing the Executive Decree 375.<sup>11</sup> The aim of this new strategy was to make a transition from the previous ineffective centralized regulatory approach to another one that would emphasize the local and adaptive governance processes (Olsen et al. 1995). The high level of social unrest among user groups and their willingness to participate in resource management allowed the CRMP to design and test tools centered on participative and action-oriented approaches (Bodero and Robadue 1995).

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<sup>10</sup> H.T. Odum is known for his major contribution to the contemporary science of ecology. He developed new approaches to formulating management strategies based on the functioning and characteristics of specific ecosystems. At the same time, Chua Thia-Eng was a pioneer in diversifying aquaculture technologies in Southeast Asia.

<sup>11</sup> Executive Decree 375 Official Register 117 of 26 January, 1989.

The project consisted mainly of the creation of 6 pilot and representative areas (Special Management Zones or ZEM<sup>12</sup>) along the coast to start a process of planning and resource management at the local level. In CRMP's own words: "this new strategy sought to see whether we could engage local residents, resource users and authorities in an open planning process to address the future use of coastal resources" (Ochoa 1995:144). These planning and decision-making processes were seen as a tool to foster local structures for implementing future resource policies. In this regard, the CRMP assumed the premise that a strengthened local constituency could bring about a national commitment to advance with coastal integrated management (Bodero and Robadue 1995). Another motivating reason was the accelerated decline of poor coastal communities' socio-economic well-being.

Complementing the preparation of the ZEM plans, the CRMP also initiated an educational component and carried out a group of small-scale practical exercises in resource management. These components were aimed at building community leadership and strengthening user groups' ability to function and participate effectively in the ZEM planning process (Ochoa 1995).

From an operative point of view, the CRMP created the "zone committees", one in each ZEM, as the main decision-making spaces. They were integrated by public authorities at different levels as well as community and user groups. In these committees each of the social groups had the same weight. However, every organization had to be legally registered and its status officially approved in order to have the right to speak and vote. This precondition led to the formation of hundreds of user groups' organizations which saw in this participative instance a hopeful way of resolving increasingly harsh socio-environmental conditions (Bodero and Robadue 1995). This organizational building-process will be the bases for the conformation of a national scale grassroots mangrove movement.

On the other hand, the Executive Decree 375 also established the creation of seven coastal law enforcement coordination units (Ranger Corps). As their name reflects, their objective was to improve the effectiveness of enforcing existing laws governing shore use, mangrove forest protection, water pollution, near-shore fisheries and shrimp aquaculture. However, in practice, the Ranger Corps mainly focused on enforcing mangrove management regulations (Arriaga 1995).

Despite the fact that there were no indications that the rates of mangrove deforestation slowed down with this new initiative, the community empowerment to govern their

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<sup>12</sup> Even in English, they are commonly referred to as ZEM from the abbreviation for the Spanish term *zona especial de manejo*.

traditional use areas improved greatly. This was in part due to the fact that they promoted the formation of community enforcement monitors (*vigilantes comunitarios*). These were community volunteers who lived and worked near a particular mangrove ecosystem and acted as alarms detecting and transmitting infractions to the port captain. This innovative measure had limited results because the legal processes were long and relatively few cases ended up with an imposed fine. What is more, in the cases with legal action, the fines were very low so they did not discourage mangrove cutting (ibid.).

One of the most salient outcomes of this new approach was the formulation of “user groups’ agreements” as a mechanism to resolve conflicts over competing land uses. Although these agreements did not have a legally enforceable status, they transferred mangrove use rights to traditional mangrove gatherers who by this time had been forcibly displaced to move to other estuaries, and their traditional economic activities had been seriously threatened. At the general level, the participation of large shrimp farms’ owners in these agreements was reduced. They were still reluctant to advance to a more democratic and participatory governance (Olsen and Coello 1995; Ochoa 1995).

During the period of 1992-1994, the Ecuadorian framework for coastal resource management was restructured and decentralized. The government both passed the Executive Decree 3399,<sup>13</sup> which established the new CRMP administrative procedures, and signed an agreement with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in order to obtain the necessary funds. This implementation phase lasted until 2001 and it was known as CRMP stage I.

In 1993, the CRMP based on the ZEM and Ranger Corps management experiences, developed a national mangrove policy proposal which was presented at the National Symposium on Mangrove Management. Once again it emphasized the failure of the current penalty based mangrove ecosystem policy and advocated for sustainable use and conservation relying on local constituencies. In particular, the proposal mainly recommended the multi-use of mangroves, the adoption of specific-site management plans, the involvement of communities in mangrove stewardship, reforestation and restoration of mangrove degraded areas, the commitment and leadership of national authorities, and the improvement of the quality of local communities (Robadue 1995).

Finally, in 1995 through the Executive Decree 3327<sup>14</sup>, sustainable traditional mangrove activities were official recognized and allowed. However, conversely, this normative

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<sup>13</sup> Executive Decree 3399 Official Register 950 of 4 June, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Executive Decree 3327, Official Register 848, of 1 June, 1995.



established the regulation of the illegal shrimp farms which were constructed before passing the Decree 1907 in 1994.<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that in 1991 the illegal shrimp farms amounted to 14,037 ha (10%) of the total 145,996 ha (Olsen and Coello 1995). Furthermore, as Figure 1 shows, until 1995 the loss of mangroves followed a declining trend. Hereafter, the destruction of mangroves was reversed in part because the five-year mangrove closure season began in 1994.

**Figure 1: Evolution of the Typologies of Soil Uses (ha)**

	1984	1987	1995	1991	1999
Mangroves	182,157	175,157	162,187	146,939	148,483
Shrimp ponds	89,368	117,729	145,998	178,072	175,167
Salt flats	20,022	12,274	6,321	5,109	4,548

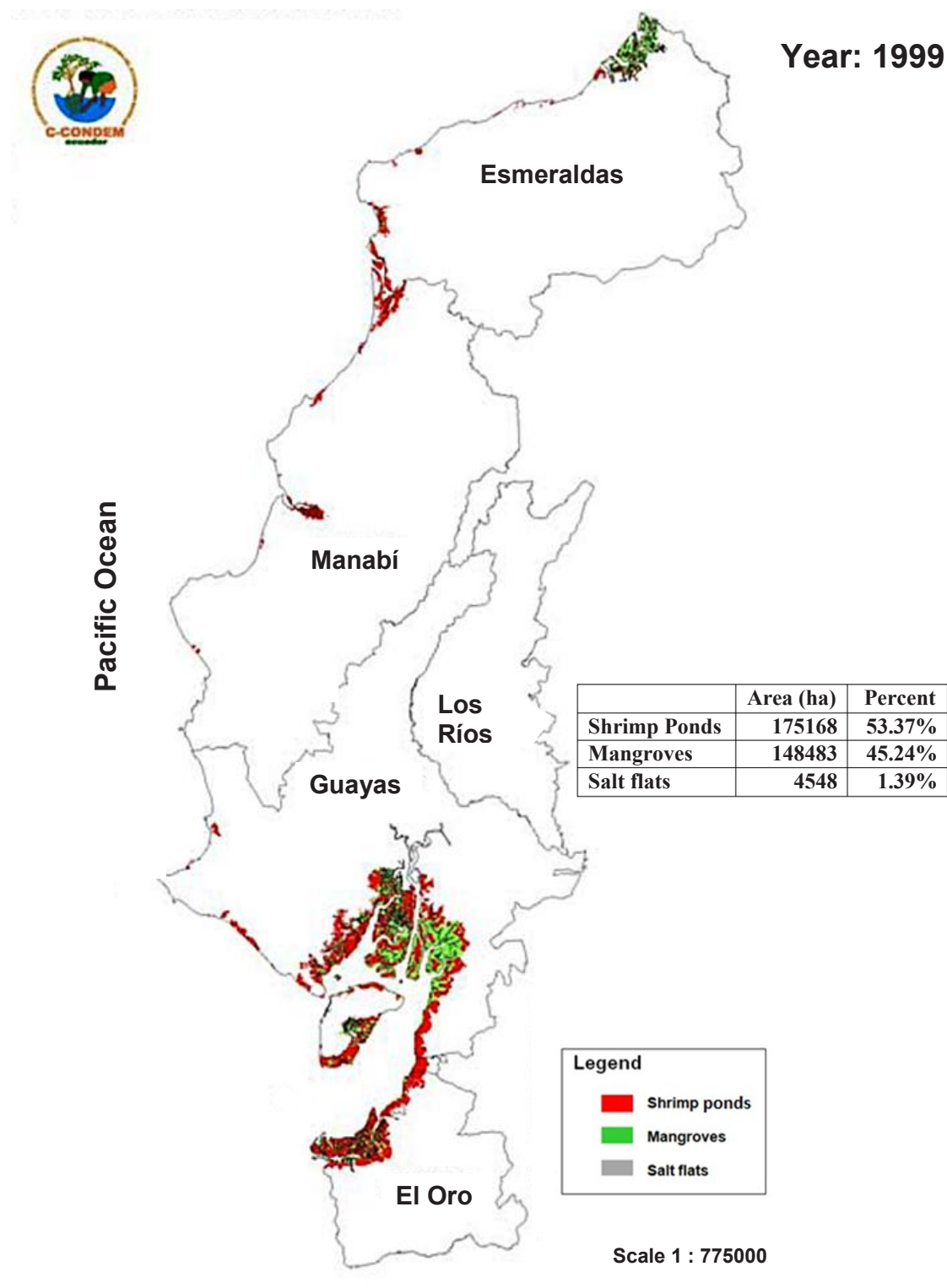
Source: CLIRSEN, 2007

In summary, while the sustainable multi-uses of mangroves were granted, and participative and decision-making instances were created to formally include coastal communities and users in resource management actions, no illegal constructed pond was acquired. On the contrary, since the first suspension of a shrimp farm license (1985), the government has been converting them to the status of legally permitted through diverse normative mandates. Accordingly, the poorest groups whose daily well-being depends on harvests from coastal waters and estuarine ecosystems have lost access to their natural source of livelihood. As a result, their quality of life has been eroded to the extent that the sense of poverty has reached profound levels. This vulnerable situation explains why this ecosystem-based indigeneity political strategy will be well received among mangrove people.

<sup>15</sup> Decree 1907, Official Register 482 of 13 July, 1994. This decree re-affirmed the public interest in mangrove conservation and established a five-year mangrove close season.

## 5.4 Phase IV: Recognition and Granting of Mangrove Traditional Uses through Stewardships

**Map 2: Ecuadorian Mangrove Areas versus Shrimp Ponds**



Source: C-CONDEM 2007, used with permission



1999 can be considered as a turning point for the Ecuadorian coastal resource governance. The most salient event, from a democratic point of view, was the enactment of Executive Decree 11022<sup>16</sup> which provided traditional mangrove users with the possibility of accessing a mangrove stewardship (commonly known as *custodias*) and prolonged the mangrove cutting ban of 1994. This resolution was preceded by several key factors: at an international level, during the 7<sup>th</sup> Conference of Contracting Parties to the RAMSAR Convention (May 1999) the V11.21-15 resolution was stated, which exhorted the establishment of a moratorium on shrimp-farming; and at a national level, the shrimp-farming industry was devastated by the White-spot virus, after reaching the largest shrimp production in 1998 (Marriot 2003). This disease outbreak reinforced the already critical situation along the coast caused by the 1997-1998 Niño climatic event. In addition to these more structural influences, a number of grassroots factors also exerted pressure on the Ecuadorian government. In this regard, an important event due to the public visibility it brought was the presence of Greenpeace's Rainbow Warrior ship in 1998 and 1999. The first year, the ship docked in Muisne (south of the province of Esmeraldas). This was followed by a symbolic performance; around 400 people, from grassroots user organizations of the different Ecuadorian coastal provinces, environmental NGOs, intellectual-activists and media reporters broke the walls of an illegal shrimp pond and proceeded to reforest it with mangrove trees. To this end, the participants made public a declaration through which they demanded the Ecuadorian government to impose a total and permanent ban on mangrove cutting and to deliver all the mangrove areas (including those converted into illegal shrimp ponds) into the custody of ancestral users' organizations, under common stewardships (personal interview, June 7, 2010). This event also served as the basis for the arrangement of the various local mangrove users' organizations into a national coalition, the Coordinadora Nacional para la Defensa del Ecosistema Manglar or C-CONDEM (National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of the Mangrove Ecosystem).

In 2000, Ministerial Decree 172<sup>17</sup> was issued which set the requirements for receiving these *custodias* concessions. The *custodias* were valid for 10 years (with the option of renewing) and granted exclusive use. From April 2000 to September 2004 the competent authority granted a total of 26 *custodias*, which encompassed 19,514.99 ha of mangroves (Coello et al. 2008). It was not granted more concessions until 2007, with a total of 29 *custodias* in 2009 (ECOBIOTEC 2009a). Their extensions vary significantly, ranging from 2953 ha to 12 ha and their main uses are collection activities such as crab and/or shellfish products.

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<sup>16</sup> Executive Decree 11022, Official Register 243, of 21 July 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Ministerial Decree 172, Official Register 365 of 20 January, 2000.

According to the interlocutors interviewed for this paper, the “*custodia* mechanism” was seen by grassroots user organizations as a great achievement because it recognized the rights of users to access and use the mangroves and gave them more mechanisms to fight against the potential expansion of the shrimp industry. However, as they claimed in 1998, they demanded not only “use agreements” as this decree established, but also the right to control and administrate all mangroves under common stewardships. Furthermore, as explained before, they also demanded the reversion of the illegal shrimp ponds in order to be reforested and available for mangrove gatherers (personal interview, September 6, 2010). The failure in accomplishing these demands had serious implications for explaining the current situation, as will be explained in the next section.

### 5.5 Phase V: Mangrove Gatherers’ Self-oppression and the Stewardships as New Enclosures

As Figure 2 indicates, already in 1999 the average mangrove conversion taking 1969 as a reference year, was 43.6% of mangrove land. This amount was larger depending on the province. Manabí was the province which experienced the biggest mangrove losses to the extent of total depletion. By contrast, Guayas followed by Esmeraldas presented the lowest rates. In the case of Guayas, the relative mangrove conservation was due to the creation in 1979 of the protected area *Reserva Ecológica Manglares-Churute* (Olsen et al. 1995).<sup>18</sup> Esmeraldas (mainly the northern area), in turn, was the last province where the shrimp-farming industry expanded. In particular, it was seriously threatened from 1994 onwards when this industry was looking for new areas free of the Taura syndrome.<sup>19</sup> However, due to the mobilization and pressure of local inhabitants, in 1996 the protected area *Reserva Ecológica Manglares Cayapas-Mataje* was created which helped to reduce the mangrove conversion (Government of Ecuador 2007).

**Figure 2: Mangrove Area Lost, by Province, 1969-1999.**

Provinces	Mangroves (ha)		Hectars lost of mangroves	Percentage of lost mangroves in relation to the province	Percentage of lost mangroves in relation to the national total	Shrimp ponds (ha)
	1969	1999				1999
Guayas	122,615	104,586	18,029	14.7	33.6	107,694
El Oro	35,144	18,911	16,233	46.2	30.2	36,833
Esmeraldas	32,343	23,189	9,154	28.3	17.0	12,997
Manabí	12,099	1,797	10,302	85.1	19.2	17,643
<b>Total</b>	<b>202,201</b>	<b>148,483</b>	<b>53,718</b>	<b>Average 43.6</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>175,167</b>

Source: CLIRSEN- C-CONDEM, 2007

<sup>18</sup> Interministerial Agreement A-322, Official Register 69 of 26 July, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> The Taura Syndrome is a disease caused by the use of pesticides on banana crops which arrived to shrimp ponds via water rain. It appeared in the village of Taura and spread over the Guayaquil gulf.

Although the legislation granted exclusive access to the *custodias* holders, in real terms the grade of restriction as well as the typology of management varies significantly between regions and cases. Among northern traditional users there is a deep sense that the mangroves are common goods, and therefore, their access cannot be restricted. Thus, despite the fact that the *custodias* were granted to specific traditional users' organizations, the community as a whole has access to them (Coello et al. 2008). On the contrary, traditional users' organizations from Guayas have the strongest restriction practices (ECOBIOTEC 2009b). As the first evaluations of these *custodias* state, this strategy of management facilitated the stabilization of mangrove extension (Coello et al. 2008). This is confirmed by the latest CLIRSEN mangrove extension update which indicates an amount of 148,230 ha of mangroves in 2006 (CLIRSEN 2007). It should be noted that the crisis experienced by the sector from 1999 onwards, also had a relevant impact on that trend. On the contrary, poor results have presented this management mechanism in terms of socio-economic benefits because it has not contributed to increasing the fisheries productivity levels (Coello et al. 2008). In general, inland fisheries along the coast have collapsed, and along with the few mangrove areas left, the quality of estuarine water is declining as other sources of pollution (apart from shrimp-farming) are increasing. Besides, the social unrest among mangrove people has been increasing in recent years (ECOBIOTEC 2009). In particular, due to the fact that few mangrove users' organizations are granted with *custodias* in comparison to the large number of mangrove gatherers (organized and independent) plus the reduced extension of mangrove areas without concessions, those without *custodia* do not have any other alternative than entering into these areas to secure their livelihoods. As Coello et al. (2008) highlight, 24 of the 26 *custodia* holders have stated that they are having problems restricting access to external mangrove gatherers. These authors also express their concerns about the effects in terms of exacerbating the conditions of poverty of these populations that this restriction into mangrove areas will have in the near future (Coello et al. 2008).

This current situation shows how these mangrove stewardships, rather than becoming a suitable mechanism to face the problems of mangrove people, have converted the remaining mangroves into new types of enclosures fueling conflicts between gatherers for their possession.

## **6. The Politics of an Environmentally Dispossessed Social Group: "Ancient Mangrove People"**

As described in the previous sections, after more than 40 years of shrimp-farming production the biophysical conditions of mangrove ecosystems have been undermined and therefore the livelihood of thousands of mangrove gatherers has become critical.

Today, mangrove gatherers devote more time and energy to food collection and are less likely to collect sufficient shellfish for both self-consumption and local sale (Coello et al. 2008; ECOBIOTEC 2009b). This fact, in turn, has forced them to intensify the use of the already scarce natural resources. Worse still, some of the traditional mangrove practices have disappeared and with them many coastal communities have been forced to move to other regions or to simply change their way of life. Accordingly, food insecurity, poverty and intra-group conflicts have increased among the local people of the mangrove regions (C-CONDEM 2007a; Ocampo-Thomason 2006).

As a result of these socio-environmental inequalities, the mangrove gatherers' grassroots movement led by the social organization C-CONDEM, responded by enacting a novel political strategy linking ecosystem to indigeneity.

In 2007, in the city of Quito, representatives from the main organizations affiliated to C-CONDEM, celebrated the First Congress of the Ancestral People of the Mangrove Ecosystem in which they declared themselves as Ancestral People and, hence claimed their collective rights:

The ancient peoples and communities of the mangrove ecosystem of the Ecuadorian Coast, based on the framework established during the First Congress (...) declare: to reaffirm our status as Ancient Peoples in light of the Ecuadorian Constitution and the Ancestral Law, with full rights based on our condition [as peoples] (collective rights, including territorial rights); we urge immediate consideration in every Public Policy in full recognition of our territorial rights as a fundamental and unavoidable guarantee for our continuity and transcendence as ancient peoples. The destruction of the mangrove ecosystem is the main threat to our rights and our territory; we demand measures to stop the industrial activity conducted by the Shrimp Aquaculture.<sup>20</sup>

As their manifesto shows, this grassroots movement has articulated a discourse about territorial rights and indigenous identity (see Latorre, forthcoming, for a further

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<sup>20</sup> Translation by the author. Original quote in Spanish: "los pueblos y comunidades ancestrales del ecosistema manglar de la costa ecuatoriana, en el marco del Primer Congreso (...) decidimos: reafirmar nuestra condición de Pueblos Ancestrales a la luz de la Constitución Política del Estado Ecuatoriano y del Derecho Ancestral, con plenos derechos derivados de nuestra condición (Derechos Colectivos, incluidos los Territoriales); exhortamos la consideración inmediata en todas las Políticas Públicas de la necesidad del pleno reconocimiento de Nuestros Derechos Territoriales como Garantía Fundamental e Ineludible para Nuestra Continuidad y Trascendencia como Pueblos Ancestrales. La destrucción del ecosistema manglares la principal amenaza contra Nuestros Derechos y Nuestro Territorio, exigimos medidas para parar la actividad industrial de Acuicultura de camarón.", Declaración de los Pueblos Ancestrales del Ecosistema Manglar, I Congreso sobre sus derechos fundamentales. Electronic document, online at: <http://www.ccondem.org.ec/cms.php?c=312>, accessed February 8, 2009.

description of PAEM politics of representation). It emphasizes their sense of belonging connected to the idea of ancestry within a natural ecosystem (mangroves). By appealing to their status as descendants of coastal pre-Columbian inhabitants, they claim to be the ancestral bearers of the mangroves (their territory). Hence, they were able to demand collective rights as the Ecuadorian constitution recognizes. Finally, they urge the state to re-constitute their territory damaged by the shrimp-farming industry as a necessary condition to their existence as a culturally differentiated social group. This declaration in the beginning of 2007 as “Ancestral Peoples” reflects a response to the Ecuadorian political climate of the period. This year, President Rafael Correa won the presidential elections with a governmental plan which expressed explicit social and environmental concerns mainly those faced by subaltern groups. Once he arrived to the presidency he called for a constituent assembly to elaborate a new Ecuadorian Constitution (November 2007-July 2008). Within this context, as the C-CONDEM president stated “we wanted to established precedence in order to be able to be recognized as ‘Peoples’ in the new constitution” (interview, 15 August 2010).<sup>21</sup> However, this objective is still to be accomplished, as there has been a negative response from the Ecuadorian state to the appeals of the Ancestral Peoples of the Mangrove Ecosystem. A discussion of the politics of the Correa government in relation to the non-recognition of the PAEM would be very interesting in furthering the discussion of the logics behind the rejection of PAEM’s claims. Concretely, to evaluate to what extent was the issue of the normalized model of a single-racialized group the main limitation or whether there were other factors such directly governmental social movement confrontation and economic interests at play. Unfortunately, addressing this issue escapes the scope of this article.

However, what it is particularly salient about this case is how a history of exclusion and natural resource depletion has led to the conformation to this “ecosystem-based indigeneity” identity by the fact that the legal category of indigeneity entails rights to collective land. This local idea of “indigenusness” has re-signified the criterion of prior settlement, normally associated in Ibero-America to colonial times, in order to be deployed against contemporary shrimp-farming occupation of mangroves. In this sense, this new indigeneity deployment can be understood as a political strategy for resisting environmental dispossession caused by neocolonial transnational powers. Likewise, it challenges the very premise of race tied to hegemonic notion of indigeneity in Latin America. This novel usage understands cultural difference on the basis of “longevity” and “ecological adaptation” rather than traditional epistemologies of “blood and culture”. Hence, it takes distance from the colonial category of “Indian” and opens up the possibility of collective attachments to indigeneity across racial lines. This novel

<sup>21</sup> “Queríamos sentar precedente para poder ser reconocidos como pueblos en la nueva constitución”, author’s translation, interview, 15 August, 2010.

political identity, by changing indigenous boundary politics and epistemologies, has opened it up to the acknowledgment of contemporary dispossessions and radical social justice.

## 7. Conclusions

The present article has described the impact on identity of tremendous socio-environmental transformations linked to mangroves over time and space. These show a territorial dynamic characterized by its ecologic and social unsustainability. The state, motivated by the possibility of obtaining high amounts of foreign exchange, decided to support the development of export mono-aquaculture controlled by the wealthiest Ecuadorian sectors and with high socio-environmental externalities. Common pool resources such as fresh water, the post-larvae (PL) fishery, and public land were allocated freely or at a very low cost to the shrimp-farming industry which reaped not only profits but also benefited from diverse economic and political measures implemented to protect it. This state shrimp-farming promotion was carried out with complete disregard for the large and powerless population of subsistence users in Ecuadorian wetland areas whose traditional rights and historical practices were totally neglected. As a result, this industry experienced an anarchic expansion along the Ecuadorian coast which entailed drastic territorial transformations such as massive mangrove depletion and therefore, the disappearance of traditional practices and uses of mangrove- ecosystems.

In spite of subsequent initiatives towards more participatory and environmental-concerned approaches over the decades, these institutional innovations arrived only once the socio-ecological resilience of mangroves had become critical. Furthermore, they have been implemented over those few mangrove areas which had survived the shrimp-farming expansion. The Ecuadorian government, instead of revoking illegal shrimp farm concessions and working to achieve extensive healthy and multi-use mangroves, has instead been rewarding the actors responsible for this trend through its continuous processes of normalization. Accordingly, the remaining mangroves are under increasingly high pressure from impoverished mangrove gatherers who are experiencing a process of self-oppression.

Against this total lack of recognition and devaluation of an ancient traditional way of life, the mangrove gatherers' grassroots movement has become active and has appropriated and re-established the hegemonic concept of "peoplehood" with the aim of organizing an emancipative political project capable of confronting the power relations supporting this degradation. These politics of peoplehood have sought to reduce mangrove people's vulnerability and help to empower them by gaining collective



title rights over the mangroves. In this regard, the political subject has justified its indigeneity claiming to have an ecosystem derived cultural particularity as a result of its mangrove ancestral occupation. Thus, this new ethnic discourse indicates a different process from that of the dominant ones which underscore a cultural difference primarily in terms of the cultural transmission of a racially defined population (Anderson 2007; Hooker 2005; Wade [1997] 2010).

Finally, while this novel ethnic identity has had the theoretical advantage of transcending perceived racial divisions mobilizing a multi-“racialized” ethnic subject, it has faced challenges to the performance of its “authenticity” as Peoples in a context dominated by normative conceptions based on a single racial line (ibid.). This case, also, raises questions about the drawbacks of granting collective land rights exclusively in terms of indigeneity, and at the same time, calls for thinking critically about hegemonic indigenous epistemologies which define who will or will not count as indigenous.

Further research in different old and new commodity frontiers, beginning with shrimp-farming countries, will be useful to explore whether changes in environmental conditions lead to collective action based on indigeneity discourses. Furthermore, it would be significant to evaluate the degree to which this political strategy is a product of different transnational actors such global capital firms or activist social networks.

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### Contact

**desiguALdades.net**

Freie Universität Berlin  
Boltzmannstr. 1  
D-14195 Berlin, Germany

Tel: +49 30 838 53069  
[www.desiguALdades.net](http://www.desiguALdades.net)  
e-mail: [contacto@desiguALdades.net](mailto:contacto@desiguALdades.net)

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